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SUBJECT: GOVERNOR WAHIDI HOSTS TIMBER CONFERENCE IN KUNAR

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On July 28, Kunar Governor Wahidi convened a shura of timber merchants, land owners, and tribal elders with three key GIROA ministers to promote his vision for the future of Kunar,s timber industry, including a halt to smuggling and the disposition of massive existing timber stockpiles. No immediate solutions were outlined but the event demonstrated the Afghan government,s determination to address the issue and hinted at the possible release of the sequestered timber stockpiles following national elections on August 20. The GIROA ministers seized the opportunity to talk directly to tribal elders about development in the province, including power, education, health, and agriculture. Some radio commentators and local leaders were skeptical, calling the event a campaign stop, but most expressed optimism that development would be accelerated early in the new administration.

¶2. (SBU) Comment: The timing of the meeting, coupled with the announced approval of a Kunar university and hospital the day following the conference, had a strong tinge of electoral politics to it, but the event did provide a needed opportunity to move the timber problem onto the national stage. End Summary.

¶3. (U) Governor Wahidi hosted a ministerial-level conference on timber in Kunar,s capital city, Asadabad, on July 28. Among the GIROA attendees, were the ministers of Finance, Commerce, and Agriculture, along with the Deputy Minister for Administration and Finance at the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG), and the Directors General for the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) and Customs.

¶4. (SBU) The Governor brought the senior delegation together with Kunar timber trade association representatives, landowners (of land where stockpiles are currently located), and tribal elders to discuss the ongoing timber sequestration. Wahidi,s stated goal was to promote his vision for the future of a licit Kunar timber industry, including a halt to smuggling and the need for the disposition of massive existing timber stockpiles confiscated by the government in 2005. Provincial officials and timber barons sought to convince GIROA that the government,s current policy of inaction has a negative effect on economic growth and longer-term stability. Wahidi also argued that Asadabad is particularly affected by stagnant timber depots that litter the capital city, pose a dangerous fire hazard, and occupy land that could be used for additional infrastructure and commercial activities. Timber traders warned that the stockpiles are decreasing in value as a result of exposure to the elements, and are therefore a wasted valuable commodity in a very poor province.

¶5. (SBU) GIROA officials agreed with local leaders, in principle, that timber stockpiles should be sold, with timber &owners8 reaping the majority of revenue. Minister of Finance Zakhilwal asked tribal elders to engage their constituencies over the next month to support the current ban

on tree cutting and smuggling. Zakhilwal agreed to work with the cabinet to consider a resolution after the completion of national elections. Minister of Agriculture Rahimi reported that the cabinet approved a new draft timber law, inter alia, establishing a forestry service. This draft is now before parliament.

¶16. (SBU) During their public addresses, both Zakhilwal and Rahimi used the opportunity to note the government's plans for further development in Kunar province, including a university, a 100 bed hospital, the provision of additional electricity, and assistance with agricultural production. While these issues were off-topic, Zakhilwal tied them in as other elements that will help Kunar's longer-term stability.

¶17. (SBU) Some radio commentators and local leaders expressed skepticism about the ministers' visit to Kunar, noting that the event resembled a campaign stop for President Karzai's development team but produced no results. In spite of the skepticism, most of Kunar's businessmen and tribal elders were pleased to see top GIROA officials in Kunar and optimistic that the government will make an effort to resolve the timber issue once elections are completed.

¶18. (SBU) BACKGROUND: Timber has long been one of Kunar's most treasured natural resources; however, forests were excessively depleted beginning with a country-wide population boom in the 1960s. The wartime conditions that followed led to unregulated and widespread cutting, and no reforestation. A government ban on cutting and transport of the commodity, mostly over environmental concerns, has led to a sophisticated black market dominated by Kunari and Pakistani

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&timber mafia.8 The international community remains concerned that the current situation is contributing to further environmental degradation, an atmosphere of lawlessness, and direct or indirect financial support of the insurgency. Draft timber legislation, which the Minister of Agriculture hopes to see pass soon, provides a long-term framework for sustainable community management of Afghanistan's timber resources, if sufficient law enforcement assets are allocated to it.

¶19. (SBU) COMMENT: Wahidi's timber conference was a success in bringing the issue onto the national stage and raising social awareness. The absence of the Minister of Interior was unfortunate; law enforcement and corruption issues surrounding timber smuggling remain key challenges. While GIROA officials were likely enticed to attend as part of their campaign efforts for President Karzai, the event sets the stage for future engagement. Announcements by the national government of a Kunar university and hospital on the day following the timber event lacked substance and reinforced the suggestion that the shura was mainly about electoral politics. Governor Wahidi will need to keep GIROA focused on the timber issue through the elections. Changes in provincial leadership as well as cabinet ministers could slow progress, and local leaders will also need to continue pushing the issue. Kunar politics remain interesting: Governor Wahidi invited a well known timber smuggler (and provincial strongman) to deliver a gift to the Minister of Commerce at the conclusion of the day's activities. Perhaps, the gift-giving will play a small part in encouraging a GIROA decision on the disposition of the timber stockpiles by late September, should the key minister remain in place. END COMMENT.

EIKENBERRY